

Solid Light: Ways through Transparent books.

Where do we start in our experience of a book when the reader/viewer cannot even see a beginning and when, in the case of the book being closed, the whole text exists as a simultaneous presence, a juxtaposed, blocked and floating mass and where lisibility of 'contents' is, at any point of access, almost impossible? In transparent formats, text and images sometimes seem to drift freely in space whilst, at the same time, we feel the book's material substance in our fingers. Though we are used to seeing through invisible atmosphere, an array of see-through pages challenges our capacities of combinatory and depth vision, offering us a rich repertoire of reflections, distortions, diverse patterning and referentiality. In such cases, content becomes container and vice versa.

We say: 'I can read you like a book,' and yet, a text's very clarity and the exposure of its cumulative layering can, paradoxically, make for daunting opacity. Our everyday language bears frequent traces of notions of corporeal transparency: 'You're an open book to me', or 'I can see through you from cover to cover'. Even more probing is 'Your behaviour is transparent', as if our imagined ability to pierce somatic surfaces with our gaze somehow gives access to concealed meaning and, therefore, understanding.

Over the last three decades, there has been established a strong (at times burgeoning), but also intermittent tradition of creating translucent books but critical appreciation of their gleaming materiality, their tactile and optical qualities and spatial complexities and of how we, as readers and viewers, engage with them, is extremely rare. This is the case even though our offices, homes and academic lives are often teeming with see-through file folders, document wallets, polypropylene pockets and acrylic ring-binders.

The production of plastic books is at least eighty years old and transparent and translucent books of poetry have existed since the 1960s. From scribing on Roman glass utensils, the scratched graffiti on the illuminated windows of churches to John Donne's poem: 'A Valediction of my Name, in the Window', we find writers fascinated by medial transparency and with its links to their own art. Donne's narrator identifies with the glass's clarity (his honesty in love), but also the window's facility to superimpose image and reflection, the speaker's etched writing and the beloved's form:

'Tis much that glass should be
As all-confessing, and through-shine as I;
'Tis more than it shows thee to thee,
And clear reflects thee to thine eye.
But all such rules love's magic can undo;
Here you see me, and I am you. (Donne 2012: 18)

Writers often associated books with the reflectivity of mirrors and a genre of 'Speculum' books appeared, possibly originating with Vincent of Beauvais and his *Great Mirror* (*Speculum Maius*) (1235-1264). Authors and artists also wanted to push home fenestral metaphors in their work, to create literally 'see-through' imagery. As early as *Il libro dell'arte* (1427), Cennino Cennini described methods of impregnating parchment with linseed oil to make the surface transparent. This kind of clear medium was used primarily for copying underlying writing or drawing. Tracing paper proper was invented around 1862. Paintings on gauze had been used in concert with rear illumination to make hidden scenes appear since the 1720s. London-based printers, Edward Orme and Rudolph Ackerman started the trend for transparent hand-coloured etchings in 1796 and these developed into 'Spooner's protean views' where an image printed on a transparency could be

changed by backlighting. Such techniques were sometimes viewed with awe and mistrust as if they were magical.

Synthetic forms of transparent media started to be used in the arts during the First World War with the desire of Constructivist artists to adapt the new materials used in industries, sculptor Naum Gabo initially employing materials such as cellulose nitrate and Perspex for his creations. By this period, transparency was one way of summoning different and contrasting views of reality and, as László Moholy-Nagy expressed: 'to set vision in motion'. (Moholy-Nagy 1947: 5) The production of different plastics and transparent materials accelerated during the inter-war years and the Second World War led to a massive increase in the production of synthetic materials as substitutes for natural media. Books often included diaphanous or translucent inserts in the form of blueprints, floorplans, templates, layers of anatomical drawings or, in children's books, scenes of miraculous transformation.

One of the wonders of the New York Fair, April 1939 was the so-called 'first book printed on plastic': 'When all the pages have been turned the entire story appears through the transparent covers as a complete unit. (Leggett 1939: 489) It is notable here that the effect gained on the reader is imagined as a retrospective narratorial overview as if this was the sole experience involved in viewing such a novelty.

Between 1954 and 6, Roland Barthes wrote the essay 'Plastics' in which he comments: 'plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation [...] it is ubiquity made visible [...] it is less a thing than the trace of a movement'. (Barthes 2006: 97) Carlo Bellolli created his *Corpi di Poesia (Poetry Bodies)* 1945-7 inserting words into different geometrical transparent media to create word-forms in space. Such ideas designated a bridge between Futurism and Concrete art. Bruno Munari, one of the second wave of Futurist artists, produced children's books such as *Nella notte Buia* (1956) involving the interleaving of transparent and translucent pages. From 1955 onwards, Ludwig Wilding created moiré effects resulting in such works as *Objekt mit Drehbewegung* (Moebius Band) (1999) where a plastic sheet moved over a plane results in a series of flexing and changing patterns. Drawing on Concrete and Op art, in 1965 the artist Schuldt could print the words of his *Glastextkörper* on a transparent glass cylinder for display. Throughout the 1960s, Dom Sylvester Houédard, in works such as *Splendid Weeping* (1971) printed poetic lines on translucent sheets resulting in some of the first books of see-through poetry.

The ubiquity of clear, synthetic materials led to artists exploring trans-medial reflexiveness and reference. Deconstructionist architect, Peter Eisenman created *Moving Arrows, Eros and Other Errors: An Architecture of Absence* (1986) which consists of a clear and printed plastic box containing 30 see-through pages of a design which could be viewed in the hand or held up to the light to be projected. Eisenman's plastic pages were plans of glass architecture, the plastic box and sheets served as a microcosmic analogue for glass sky-scrapers.

In 'Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep' Katherine Hayles envisages materiality in books
'as the interplay between a text's physical characteristics and its signifying strategies' and

a dynamic quality that *emerges* from an interplay between the text as physical artifact, its conceptual content, and the interpretive activities of readers and writers. Materiality cannot be specified in advance [...] it performs as connective tissue (Hayles 2004: 72)

Theoretically, this statement might never seem to be truer than when applied to a reader/viewer beginning to experience a book which is substantially or completely transparent. Yet, paradoxically, to discuss a volume like Hsia Yü's *Pink Noise* 粉紅色噪音 (a book in which successive poems in English and Chinese visually show through others and therefore 'exist' alongside and within each other simultaneously), complicates and challenges even Hayles's generous sense of interpretive dynamics. The volume's so-called 'signifying strategies' and 'conceptual content' are myriad and contradictory.

In discussing Louise Rosenblatt's descriptions of reader stances: the aesthetic (focussed on the reading experience itself) and efferent, (focussed on gathering information), Eric J. Paulson and Sonya L. Armstrong write of their three-dimensional model which breaks:

away from a more uni-dimensional, left/right and up/down-only model in which a reader's stance is either more or less of something; that is, more aesthetic and less efferent, or vice versa. Much like a wave, which includes left/right, up/down, and back/front orientations, in a multi-dimensional stance continuum, different aspects of reading [...] and focus work in concert before, during, and after reading. (Paulson and Armstrong 2010: 87)

With 'beginnings' in mind, the prospect of broaching transparent books might take us back to our early stages in apprehending texts. Fernando Poyatas reminds that our first encounters with books include 'synaesthesis mental-sensory perception' of the volume's tactile/kinaesthetic qualities involving senses of its thickness, weight, texture and even smell. (Poyatas 2008: 8) Thereafter, subliminally, our flexing consciousness seeks some hold or purchase in the book, manifest in a gathering of codes, cues and signifiers to facilitate transit from outer to inner surfaces, negotiating ways over and past the publication's external objecthood toward anticipation of interiority and a notional continuity which, we project, will sustain duration of attention. When our eyes register no distinction between interior and exterior or no evidence of logic for continuity, elements of these preliminary assays are stalled or rebuffed. In contemplating books that can be experienced physically and sometimes instantaneously in at least three dimensions, we gradually become aware of the multiplicity of our viewing procedures.

The printed strip, obi or belly-band (which Yü calls 'wrap-around liner notes') circles the slipcase of *Pink Noise* on which appear the words:

I've always wanted to make a transparent book, and
after I had finished composing the thirty-three poems
gathered here, I knew the time had come to make
this book of poetry filled with "written noise" [...] Then
I put it in an aquarium and a swimming pool and left
it in the rain for days... This is a book that knows no
limits and thus knows not to go too far. (Yü, 2008: liner note)

Through the transparent slipcase, one can view the slightly compacted capitals of the title, the bold black of 'NK' of PINK overlaid with the NO of NOISE and the lower zone of NOISE joined to the tops of the second to fifth ideograms of 粉紅色噪音 and the blended tiers of black and grey English lettering (mostly illegible as yet) justified to the left and soft pink Chinese lettering justified right, receding away from our gaze into the interior. The overall effect is of stylised vistas: coloured clouds converging or a livid sunset in darkening water.

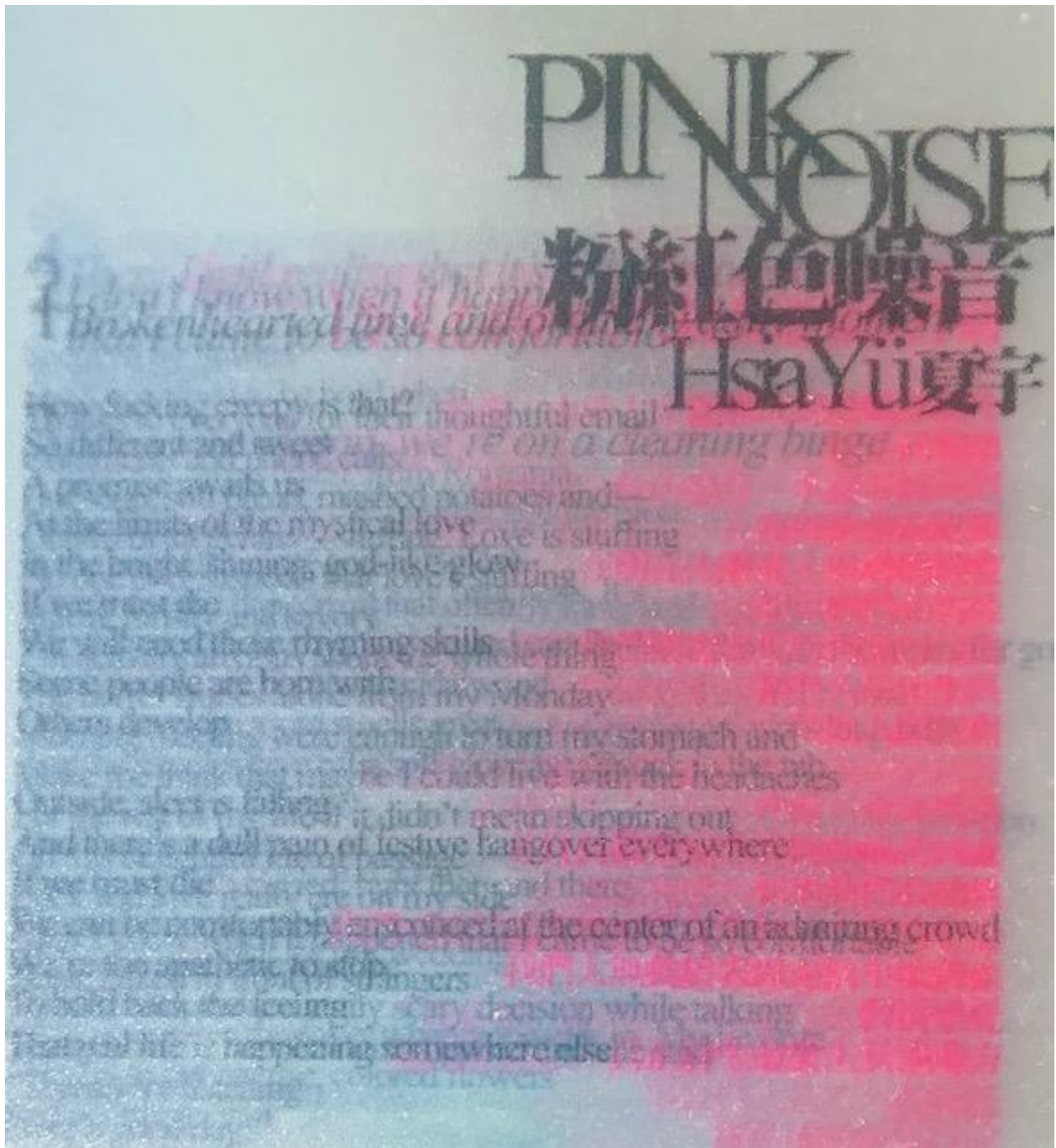


PLATE 1

With the removal of the slipcase the title lettering sharpens, even though there is still one invisible layer between the reader/viewer and the title-page. There is no publisher's peritext or title page and no clear distinctions in pagination or front matter: in terms of scopic awareness, cover transparency, title page and the texts of the first four or five poems in both languages are one simultaneous entity. Cleverly and uproariously, the one phrase that floats free of the lexical/graphic miasma is: 'How fucking creepy is that?' (Ibid: 1)

The poet created these works by clicking on hyper-links in spam, selecting and extracting statements, then interleaving these with lines from Shakespeare, Poe and other canonical authors, translating these resulting lines into Chinese via a programme called Sherlock and then re-

translating these into English. She then lineated these texts to resemble poetry and, the slipcase informs us, placed them to create 'the semblance of a bilingual volume of translation.' (Ibid: slipcase) The poetic lines often leave the reader with a sense of space and emptiness in keeping with the book's material form. Paradoxically, given the strong presence of the blurred mass of text, any sense of a notional unifying authorial presence or signifying locutor is absent.

The sheer physical depth of the transparent pages' clarity (its 82 pages seeming much deeper), leads to an almost total obscurity in terms of a focused logical reading. The background noise of the superimposed lettering becomes our horizon of experience of the book, all parts combined: an undecipherable scopic cacophony. Of course, we can introduce an extraneous white insert behind each page to read them individually which leads to the question of how much an intrinsic component of the book's performative array does such a sheet become?

In discussing 'translingual transculturalism in *Pink Noise* in 2015, Tong Kong Lee reports that he finds himself grappling with the opacity of the volume's materiality:

It is immediately obvious that *Pink Noise* is designed not to *facilitate* but to *inhibit* reading thanks to its bizarre tactile and visual properties. The transparency material is slippery and the book considerable heavy; the superimposition of texts and colours is confusing to the reader's eyes [...] the unwieldiness of *Pink Noise* is part and parcel of the process that Hsia wants to put her readers through. (Lee 2015: 40)

One understands that, to a certain extent, Lee is setting up a 'stalking horse' here yet one most remarkable feature of his response is its sense of an imagined immediate estrangement on behalf of a reader. In other words, the plastic materials used to create *Pink Noise*, which Roland Barthes in 1956 called 'ubiquity made visible' and which has been printed, painted and used to create books, folders, documents and covers for over eighty years are seen, in this context, as 'bizarre', unwieldy and as a kind of obstacle course which Lee imagines that the author wants 'to put us through', all despite Lee's later emphasis on accepting indeterminacy in the text and developing fluidity of response. (Ibid) The critic imagines struggling through collapsing 'independent clauses' (whilst his notional reader understands that this is exactly how the book resists reading), and that this concomitant difficulty is intrinsic with Yü's formative design. (Ibid: 42) Rarely has that which has evolved into a predominantly Intentionalist approach seemed so looped into self-fulfilling disappointment.

Michele Yeh takes a similar lexical line to Lee's critique, arguing that the process of reading *Pink Noise* is constantly interrupted, prolonged and delayed by the reader turning back, inserting the white sheet, and being distracted by their own reflection in their peripheral vision on the opposite page. Yet, in both cases, we might ask what is 'the' (note the singularity), 'reading process' implied?

Far from Lee's estrangement and Yeh's difficulty, Joyelle McSweeney advocates seeing *Pink Noise* as 'a must-have one-off' which rewards being handled

in the flesh. To see one's face liquefied, sliding and slipping on the stiff, slick, polyurethane leaves is to be confronted with such vertiginating (sic) quandaries as, how can transparency equal privacy? One thinks of huge flat planes of glass climbing story by story into heat-and-light [...] There is a text on every level, written backwards in the flux: [...] this tide of surfaces may flex again, instantly and place you in the mise-en-abyme of your own bathroom mirrors, or kneeling before the computer screen reflecting your own wide-parted

penetrable eye. *Pink Noise* is startling on so many levels, most distinctively in that, lost in its cloudy voxbox, you can't tell what level you're on. (McSweeney 2007)

McSweeney's commentary is discursive and inventive yet here, far from 'seeing one's face' proving an unhelpful distraction, the experience is one of relish and enjoyment. Her attention to effects of liquidity and 'tide of surfaces' is certainly close to Yü's liner-note comment for *Pink Noise* 'I put it in an aquarium and a swimming pool and left it in the rain for days.' These are the lexes of display and relaxed reception: optical and tactile delectation, not of narrational analysis. Yet of course the idea of non-degradable plastic artefact placed in an aquarium or pool also has ecological implications. Taiwan's government under Chiang Kai Shek, found economic renewal in petrochemical plastics and the manufacture of PVC. The market for polymers was vast and its use became associated with the island, so Yü's application of the material always carries complex transcultural codes.

Why choose to 'read' such a dazzlingly-complex array in ways which Lee and Yeh follow and which exclude the cumulative graphic and spatial impact of most of the book? It is clear that any estrangement Lee might project onto this codex which is specified by the author as 'a semblance' stems in large part from the state of bizarreness into which, initially, he casts the book even as he tries to normalise its material status by reading it as a conventional trans-lingual text. Perhaps most tellingly, Yü informs us in her afterword that Thierry Cuvillier persuaded her 'to hold firm to the form of a classical codex despite my mania for using transparent materials.' (Ibid.: 180) Therefore, the concept of a conventional codex-form was not the only aesthetic format considered for this shifting conceptual work.

Since Yü has, at times, shrugged off almost all of the soubriquets offered her by critics: Postmodern and Feminist among them which should surely give us pause as should her description of the book's form as 'lettristic noise' inspired by Taiwan's underground noise community, it would perhaps not prove helpful to further Lee's vision of the author as taskmaster. (Ibid.) Neither the 'Lettrism' nor the 'noise' in 'lettristic noise' denote this kind of strenuous critical interpretation and Yü's primary influence is music. Under her lyricist name: Lee Ge-di (李格弟) she is a prolific writer for contemporary Taiwan musicians. In relation to *Pink Noise*, she writes: 'I had been listening to all these great noise and low frequency acoustic art CDs and wondering what would result if that concept were applied to words when I came upon this translation program.' (Ibid.) Low frequency acoustic art music is ambient, immersive and, above all, does not solicit an earnest quest after meanings. Any awareness of Lettrists, Isidore Isou and Gabriel Pomerand's, invention of Hypergraphy which uses 'letters' primarily as sounds and then as abstract images without traditional connotative values seems to have passed Lee and Yeh by.

One wonders why, since the poems of Yü's books are lexically neutral, there has been little consideration of *Pink Noise* as a book sculpture and the poet's text as optically-engaging abstract patterning, perhaps in the way we might consider asemic writing. After all, most of the pages in the book resemble dense meshes of words or states where the compressed ideograms and western letters take on the appearance of a tapestry's shaggy and bunched rear side:

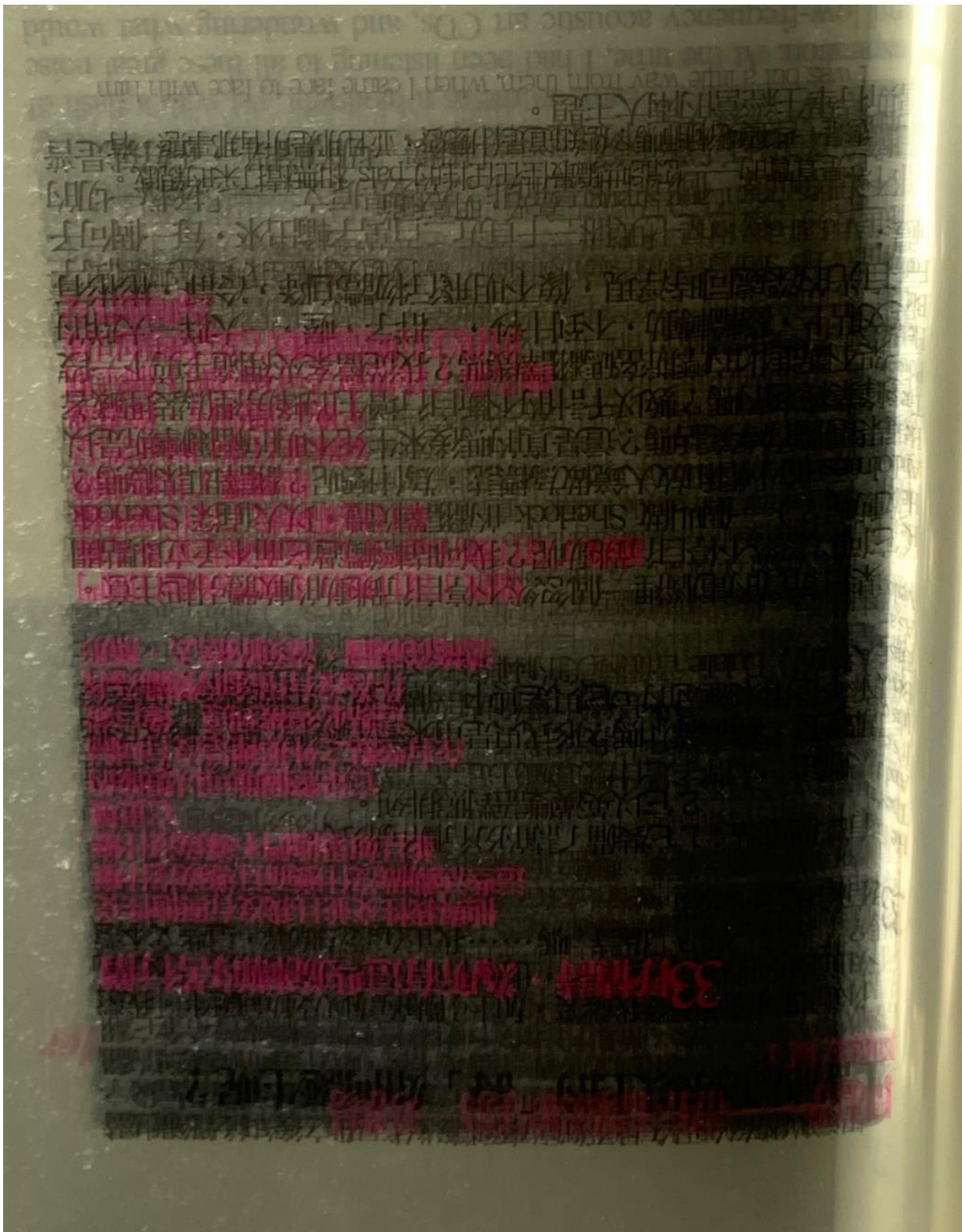


PLATE 2

In places, the overlapping pink print is so thick it resembles splashed paint.

It is true that, as Johanna Drucker has reminded us, critical studies about and anthologies of artist's and avant garde books have been relatively thin on the ground but the period just prior to the appearance of Lee's essay saw a surge of texts discussing experimental books and activities

involving such volumes, including *A Century of Artists' Books* (1994), *The Book as Spiritual Instrument* (1996), *Imagining Language, An Anthology* (1998), *A Book of the Book*, (2000) *Figuring the Word* (1998), and *The Book as Art* (2007). In *The Artist Book in a Global World* (2003), Wulf D. von Lucius draws attention to transparent artists' books as a vital sub-section of publishing. Macy Chadwick has created a series of book workshops entitled: 'Hidden and Revealed, An Exploration of Transparent Materials'.

Additionally, any attempt to represent *Pink Noise* as a 'bizarre' singleton surely distorts a general reader's awareness and the publishing record of transparent books. A brief survey of other 'clear' examples available in 2015 and before, reveals Becky Slemmons' book of kiln-fired, cold-worked glass, *They did not know that the books were already in our head*, (2015), Alexandra Keck's 'Glass Artist Book' (2012), the pages etched with seven continents, Adele Outteridge's book-sculptures in transparent media including 'Vessels', photographer Kadja Mater's minimalist creations, Helen Malone's engraved perspex concertina book, Teresa Mulet's *oximoron*, selected productions by Philippa Wood', Olafur Eliasson's *A view becomes a window* (2013) (leather-bound books with pages of coloured hand-blown glass), Mirabelle Jones' acrylic book of acetate prints: *San Francisco and Berlin* (2013), Claire Jeannette Satin's *Pentimento* series based on interpenetration and indeterminacy and Susan Johanecht's book of alternating plastic sleeves: *Emissions* (1992) with texts by Katharine Meynell. There are codices of reclaimed glass and plastic, a Lexan version of H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* created anonymously and with no date and Basia Irland's motionless books of ice. Major book artist, Hede Kyle has produced a series of translucent works including: 'Cricket Concert' and 'Mica Flags' fashioned from gleaming mica and mylar. Osvaldo Romberg's book-sculpture 'The Song of Songs' (1996), the clear pages of which are unreadable when juxtaposed and which pre-dates the first edition of *Pink Noise*, reveals a ready experimental and sculptural context for Yu's book.

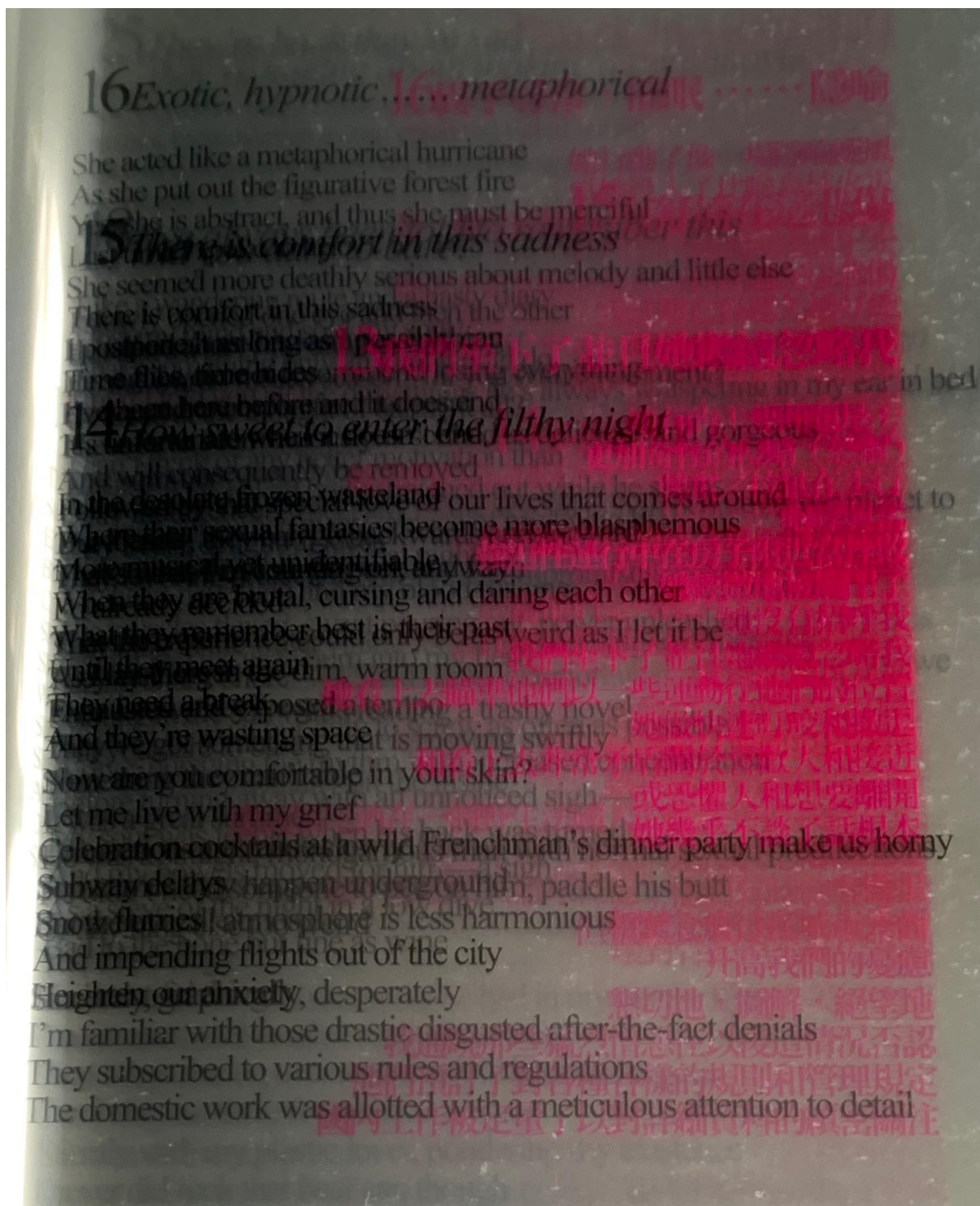


PLATE 3

In developing these themes and, in comparison with *Pink Noise*, it is valuable to discuss Tauba Auerbach's also very beautiful transparent book *STAB / GHOST* (2013).

STAB / GHOST is a four-colour silkscreen production printed onto 100 sheets of 250 microns Lexan with stab binding using lanyards of plastic thread. To emphasise its aesthetic qualities, the book is mounted on a specially designed light table, to allow light projection (ROSCO LED panels) from

below, and is placed within a plexiglass hood and is, therefore, immediately spatially privileged and positioned as a light sculpture.



PLATE 4

As in the case of *Pink Noise*, in Auerbach's book, the extreme clarity of the medium, and its accompanying sense of depths and colours, have evoked oceanic associations, selected pages of the volume being held open by a Perspex 'wave'.

It is true that the blurring lexical word phalanxes of Yu's book do not possess the regularity of Auerbach's abstract patterning and the latter artist's book is larger (30 x 40 x 2.5 cm as compared with 16.2 x 21.2 x 1.2 cm), but both books feature contrasts of dense designs on transparency. The play of Auerbach's patterning is complex and dazzling. There are no letter forms per se in *STAB / GHOST* but Auerbach has often worked with language before and has stressed her interest in inter-relations between geometries, design and colour theory.

In our first view of the upper cover at close range, Auerbach's patterns acquire different visual consistencies and associations. Based on moiré effects, as we turn pages and the lower page block is seen through curving upper surface, green, yellow, black, blue opened triangles overlap in complex circuitries and patterns of lightning-shapes, zig-zag forms and shifting modal groups.

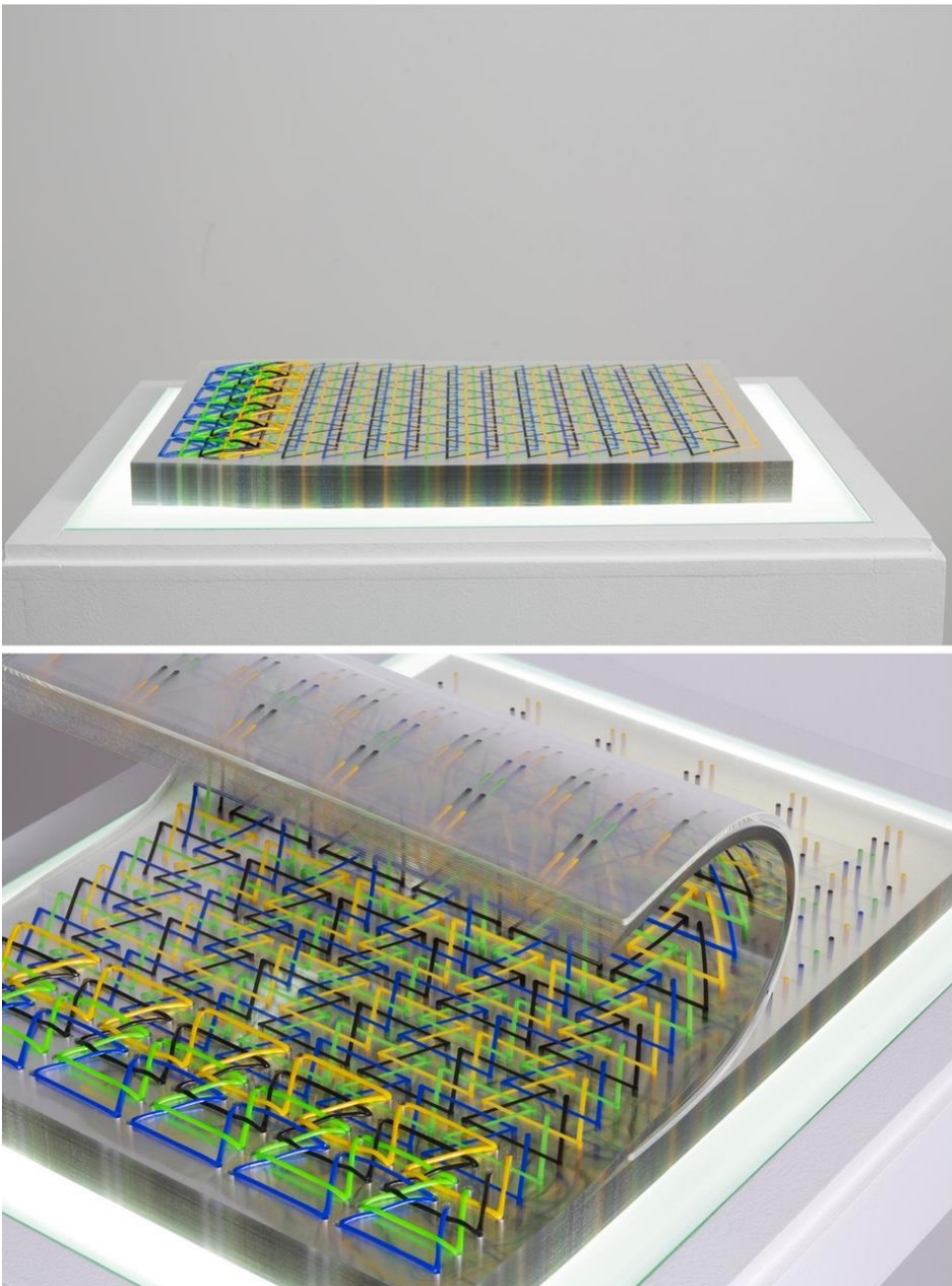


PLATE 5

There is a *trompe l'oeil* effect as the coloured threads of the stab binding, exactly matching the disposition of the pattern's angles, seem to float towards and away from the gaze. Due to the graphic shorthand of perspective in the shapes, the yellow triangles seem to be below the blue ones which are under green which are under black but then we note that black is under yellow. This of course throws our minds on an intriguing optical loop of depth and perspectival confusion worthy of M.C. Escher's art. Neat spatial registration and usual ways we use to perceive this evade us like the fleeting ghost of the artist's title. Just like the binding, and the sharper, shorter marks in the book's lower zones, our eyes try to 'stab', to pinion the sinuous lines which flash on different levels. The pages' reflective sheen is ravishingly complex.

In the lower zones of the book, the effect is like looking downwards into an impossibly-receding hypnotic glass floor, shafts of pure colour seemingly solid as columns suspended in space. Auerbach has described her work as an attempt to reveal ‘new spectral and dimensional richness...both within and beyond the limits of perception’ and *STAB / GHOST* seems to shift between two and three dimensions in space. (2012) This book also explores ‘the limits of our structures and systems of logic [...] and the points at which they break down and open up onto new visual and poetic possibilities.’ (Ibid.) The densely arranged levels of lettering in *Pink Noise* similarly explore conceptual limits and, in both cases, we are left with the enjoyment of questions, not answers.

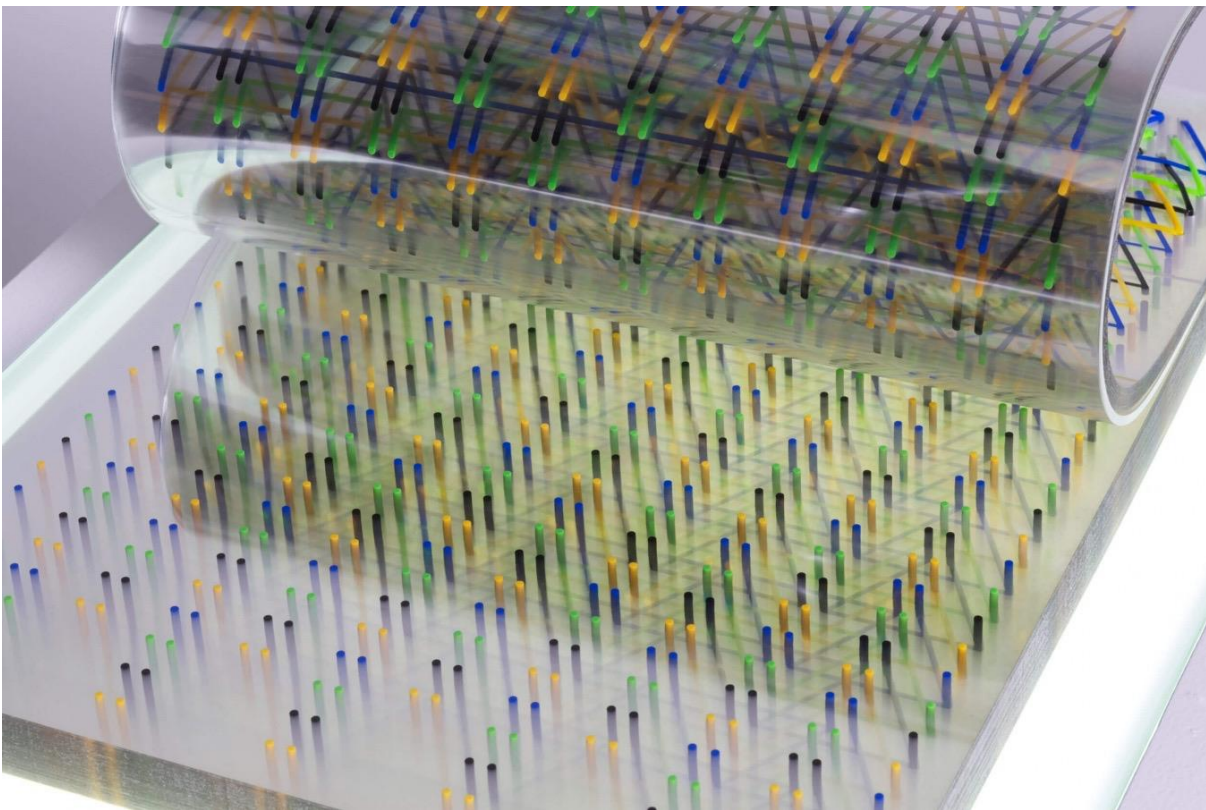


PLATE 6

As Karen L. Schiff writes: ‘This flipping between two and three dimensions’ in *STAB / GHOST* ‘echoes the basic conditions of any book: a page of printed text can be seen as visual pattern on the paper’s surface, or as the gateway into the depths of an ideational world. In Auerbach’s work both possibilities stay active.’ (Schiff: 2014)

Thomas Ingmire’s ‘Jeu de Marseilles, Game of Marseilles’, is a hand-scribed and painted one-of-a-kind book which juxtaposes many different ideational levels through its play of depths and surfaces. The book was inspired by my poem of the same name and a video interpretation of the poem by film-maker Howard Munson with accompanying music by ‘Light Years Away’, ‘Galactic Damages’ and ‘Ethereal Choir Ascends’. My poem evokes the card game images created by Surrealist Artists Andre Breton and Max Ernst as they waited to leave Marseilles in 1941. Ingmire writes of the influence of Munson’s video:

The movement and layering of images in a video are very different from a book which is limited mainly to a person turning the pages. I enjoy working with page sequence as an expressive tool in my books, but I wanted to expand the idea for this book. Working on transparent mylar, which I had explored before, adds to the sense of movement and seemed a logical choice. The show through allows images to be seen in a complex multiplicity of views. (Ingmire: 2020)

Appreciation of visibility and semi-visibility, the pages' textures and their varied display of markings are crucial to any process of viewing. For Ingmire, his choice of variously clear, semi-transparent and frosted plastic pages affected his methodology as an artist intimately. He continues:

I used a semi-transparent frosted surface for some of the pages. The frosted surface, interesting enough, allows for the lettering to be done with pens made from goose and turkey quills. These tools have traditionally been used for writing manuscripts on calfskin parchment in the Middle Ages.

Working with mylar opens many interesting opportunities and at the same time has some limitations. I have discovered that it is necessary to use acrylic based inks and paints. Other media ultimately will either not stick or in time will crack off. The surface of mylar can be altered by buffing with sandpaper or scratching with knife blades. Inks and paints can be scratched off with various tools [...] I also like how the mylar changes my design process. I work spontaneously, completely free from sketches. (Ibid.)

The cover/ title page has large areas of transparency which allows considerable 'show through'. The upper zone of the cover is caught between the bold red up-ended 'L'-shape at left which seems to fray (out of which the lateral black title lettering: 'JEU DE' appears) and then shatter at the M of 'MARSEILLES' and the red 'L' in the upper right corner which, in contrast to its left-hand and two-fold appearance in the film, has re-assumed its usually legible position. Yet, though the 'LL' of MARSEILLES and the dimly visible 'LLED' (seen from page 3) are meant to be lexically connotative, Ingmire has written of the red 'L' shapes on the cover: 'Those "L"s were not meant to be letters, but just angles. Can't really give a reason for them, or remember just why they happened'. (Ibid.) It is clear then that, from our first encounter with the book, there is a free play of abstract calligraphic mark-making.

Ingmire stresses the importance of reading/viewing 'through' the book, being simultaneously aware of each visible layer and its overlay effects especially as such considerations led his creation of the codex:

Because of the transparency, from the cover image, one sees all the way to page 5. The 'show through' of something done on one page guides what I might do on the reverse and this in turn may suggest additions or subtractions to the original page. Also, particular to David's poem, reading the words on one side and seeing them in reverse on the other mirrored the word-play he used in the poem. (Ibid.)



PLATE 7

We can see that certain images: the intertwining red curlicue, the red and yellow flowerhead, red shards, spiral, blue lattice and the domino-like dot are drawn from Munson's film and Ingmire has substantially adapted this imagery: the blue lattice (more like a window-frame or aerial view) is twisted and warped, its torn struts seeming to pierce the twisted curlicue which has assumed the fleshy sheen of an internal organ. All this is obviously in keeping generally with a surreal and specifically with these Surrealists' views of war. These mysterious shapes accrue in the cover's lower half and seem to suck the viewer's gaze in like a vortex, to draw us down the cover's space in a series of diagonals in to a kind of chaotic whirlpool or labyrinth. Shards like jagged piano keys appear behind the sub-title. The whole effect is one of toppling vertigo.

With his cover, Ingmire has also picked up on the idea of exploding ‘ghost-doors’ in the poem’s opening lines:

automatic scribble tint of mind’s sepals
cascading out, shuddering pack
waterfall to volcano on a clove
explodes: ghost-doors flap simultaneous,
slam in thrall to gust, enthralled, (Ingmire, 2018: 3)

Just as the poem features lexical and sonic reversals here in, for example: ‘**clove**’ and ‘**volcano**’ to suggest the Marseilles Tarot card’s original interpenetrations and explosions, so tilting towers disgorge black smoke in the background and the sharp black lettering begins to slant, warp and shudder. We remember Ingmire’s emphasis on the kinetic possibilities of working with mylar. The words: ‘slam in thrall to gust’ begin, pictorially, to jolt and undulate and Ingmire closes the defining spaces creating a new compound: ‘thralltogust’ (worthy of James Joyce) and isolates and pulls apart the following word into ‘en thr a lled’, creating the effect of a verbal stutter and the ‘l’ letters jiggling simultaneously in a dance of disintegration. The script itself, its hairline-thin to strong broad strokes created with goose and turkey quills, simultaneously reminds of a blend of Gothic minuscule and K’tav Ashurit Jewish lettering yet the spatial freedom of its deployment has a Dadaist freehand verve, all associations matching the text’s cataclysmic tensions.

Returning to the cover, we can now see that the ‘lled’ component of the dislocated ‘enthralled’, the ‘ame’ of ‘game’ and ‘flame’ of ‘aflame’, (though on different lines in the poem), are visibly grouped together. These fractured words fly between the upper section of an oblong (hinting at cards) and the stylised petals. With retrospective appreciation of just one of the ways in which the semi-transparency of cover and opening pages work, we can see that, the artist has used the material status of the book, (in a series of assays, purposes and accidents) to gather these letters into new visual units for our first glances at his book.

Reading the poem juxtaposed with and through Munson’s film, the film-maker’s surging images, music and borrowed background footage from the Second World War newsreel, this book artist and calligrapher has created a remarkable new work. Exhibiting a daring multi-dimensional referentiality (cards, poem, film, music, one-of-a-kind book) Ingmire has imagined and re-imagined successive responses in his own vivid medium, reacting to ways in which each mark on different pages affected the ensemble. Inasmuch as motivations can be envisaged or projected, a factor in this process was the evocation of mystery, a journey through surfaces and space:

The title page is a frosted sheet of mylar which somewhat obscures the images on the following pages, giving a sense of mystery and at the same time a complexity because of the obvious overlaying of images. If anything, I wanted the viewer to be intrigued and curious about what is ahead of them as they go through the book. (Ibid.)

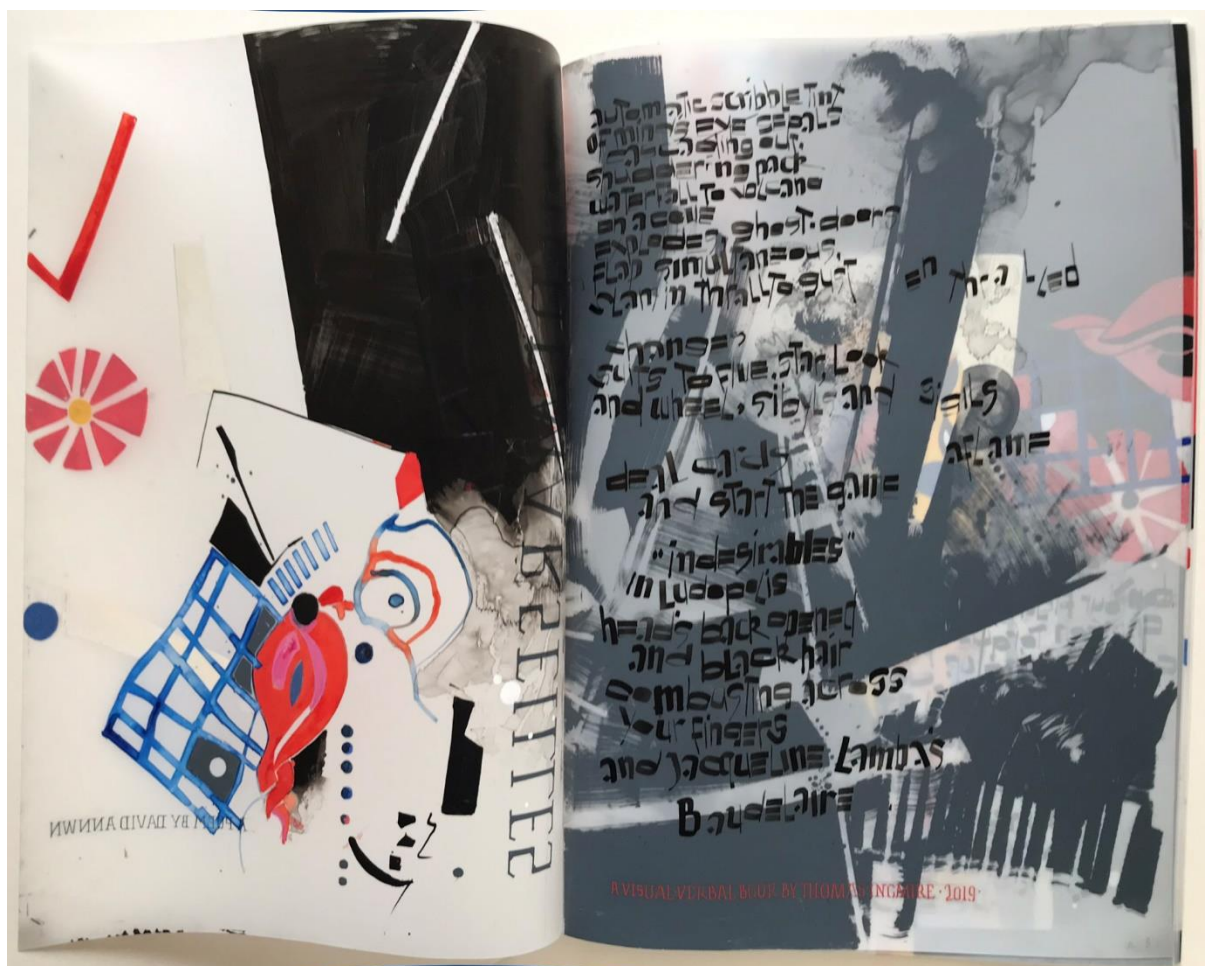


PLATE 9

The mysteries of Maureen Cummins' *Ghost Diary*, an artist's glass book in accordion format, initially stem from a handwritten letter discovered by Cummins in the Weir Farm archive, Wilton, Connecticut. The letter, written by Colonel Jonathan Rhea to his children on the anniversary of his wife's death, recalls starkly-contrasting events in Weir's experiences: his courtship of the children's mother as well as their birth juxtaposed with horrific acts of violence against rebels and Native Americans in the Revolutionary War. These extracts of document are juxtaposed in different panels with vintage photographic negatives which, in viewing, shift uncannily between negative and positive images. The artist writes:

This project began with me finding the glass negatives. I was fascinated by them, the inversions, the play between positive and negative. I wanted to find a text that 'mirrored' that. It turned out to be several years until I came across this letter of Rhea's, which of course was perfect. The fact that the images and text weren't chronologically related meant nothing to me; at that point I no longer saw images as illustrations in the traditional sense. (Cummins: 2020)

Cummins writes about the 'title page' and the extract of handwritten text found there.

It's mainly about Rhea's boyhood and youth. —(I wanted to concentrate on Rhea's military experience and juxtapose that against his experience as a father and husband. So this entire page, which very much forms the backstory, was not included in the transcribed text.) Rhea reveals that he was born in 1750, was an 'unlucky' boy, and that was apprenticed to someone-or-other (illegible). Soon after this apprenticeship, 'the states entered into determined opposition to certain acts of the British Parliament.' (Ibid.)

Ghost Diary is an extraordinarily powerful and haunting creation. There are obvious visual and conceptual paradoxes and hints of transgression inherent in the public display of sections of an intimate 'diary' or memoir extracted from a private letter. How can a ghost have a diary and how can we view such an artefact? The accordion or orihon format is venerable and appearances date back to the Tang dynasty in China, a model which was shortened for glass or plastic photographic display units popular in domestic settings globally. The title lettering and side-margins of each pane are black which gives the assemblage an effect associated with monuments of mourning and Memento Mori. Sections of the display can be closed and blocked off or angled differently (each variously: acutely, by right angle, obtusely and fully shut) by the artist, curator and viewer. So the installation can be viewed in a myriad of different dispositions and, crucially, combinations, or displayed completely with all pages open, or each section closed and with only the title page on show. At each point of viewing, we might wonder about the section of information occluded, the hidden.

Additionally, the glass of the title page is transparent so that one can see, through Rhea's engraved handwriting, the angles of other framed pages with their images receding away from us: a sense of lives and times beyond or lived at a tangent to us. The photographic portraits of women (there are five in the edition to hand, dating from the 19th century to the 1920s) flicker eerily between negative and positive images, a haunting prospect when one considers their anonymous (in our contexts), originals. There is also a fenestral, partial 'see through' quality to other pages and the angling of the various panes so that these sometimes face each other at oblique and lesser angles. Of course, these effects vary with the observers' changes of viewpoint and the ways they move round the

installation. This complexity of photographic shifts, translucency and part-facing glass surfaces not only sets up an impression of intense self-referentiality but also of complex and contrasting meshes of reflection across the planes of display. In one positioning of the first few panes, a woman's profile, darkened and made complex with oblique reflection, is crossed by contrasting avenues of print. If a viewer stares at an image of the reflections in the first portrait at close quarters and then stands back, they clearly see a woman's head and shoulders encased in and emerging uncannily from diagonal drifts of words. These words, these kinds of language, terms of endearment and the savage double-standards surfacing from recording private family life and war impact crucially on women's lives, and so on all our lives. History might be suppressed but it returns to haunt us. Cummins calls each distinctive edition of *Ghost Diary* a 'family'.

Ghost images seem to float over and through pages and surfaces. At times it seems as though some of these effects are similar to those in 19th century games such as *Spectropia* where the player stares at negative images until, on looking at a blank sheet, a positive reversed image appears. Yet *Ghost Diary*, though it is portable and can be re-arranged, packed away and transported, is no game. We find ourselves and our own implied life-experiences and mortality involved in the spectacle and words of Rhea's epistle. If the accordion format reminds us of domestic photo frames, we also remember the mirrors with fold-out side panels on dressing-tables and also the small portable reliquaries and altars created for individual meditation and devotion. If we're able to lean closely enough to Cummins's panes, we would see our own reflections juxtaposed with historic women's portraits. St Paul's epistle tells us that the believer glimpses God 'as through a glass darkly' (1 Corinthians 13. 12). Cummins writes of:

the way in which patriarchy brutalizes everyone, witness *Ghost Diary*. As women we are trying to understand men, war, physical violence, the threat that we often feel in relation to men's power and desire, and the problem that we continually live with, which is that our stories often go dismissed or denied. When I was making *Ghost Diary*, those problems were definitely on my mind in relation to life and the world. I fell in love with Rhea and his language. Women are looking for men like him--men who are that loving and sincere. And I think I was grappling with the problem of language. From my vantage point now, I find that beautiful, high-minded, gentlemanly language of the 18th and 19th centuries to be much more suspect. You could call it cynicism, but I would say it's simply more realistic to wonder what's "behind" those fine words and sentiments, especially in relation to acts and involvements that are ugly and brutal. Are the words real--that other, vulnerable part of men that can't be exposed-- or are they just conventions? (Ibid.)

In encountering *Ghost Diary*, we grapple with Rhea's language, its gaps, its repressions, its unexpressed complicity and the savage shifts in register behind the expressions of affection. Never has the silence of the transparent book seemed so full and, paradoxically given its portable nature, its stillness so complete and its immobility so palpable as we walk around the reflecting frames. The wrenching and brutal contrasts of Rhea's plangent words, the images of 'lost women' retrieved by the artist and thoughts of our own involvement cut across time to the moments of our viewing.

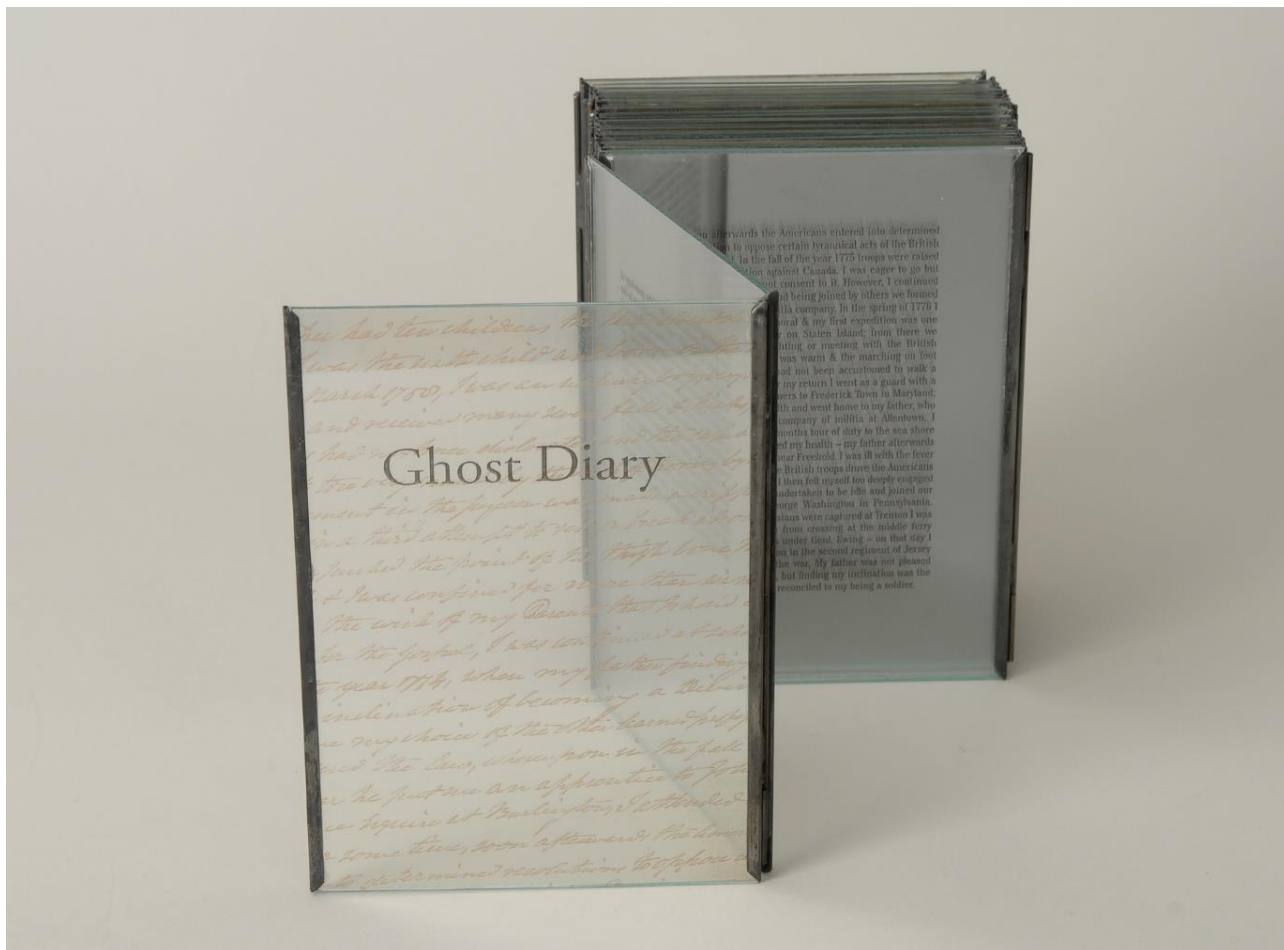


PLATE 10



PLATE 11

The British marched to Philadelphia & took possession of it without further opposition. Nothing of consequence happened until the battle of Germantown, a few days before which I received the melancholy account of the death of my father and mother, and they died within less than two days of each other and were buried in one grave. I had never since one year for grief, had never known what it was to grieve. They had been to me the best of parents, ever tender and affectionate. I situated near of absence and went home to my afflicted brothers and sisters. I staid with them a few weeks and again joined my regiment at Whitmarsh. There we continued in town till late in December when we were ordered to march to Valley Forge and find for the winter. I followed it my duty in going to see again to have my late father's affairs arranged (being the eldest son), and applied to Genl. Maxwell for leave of absence & on being refused resigned my commission. I staid at home until April 1778, when not being content, thinking that in the army I was the most serviceable in my country, I again joined my regiment with the rank of Lieutenant.

In contrast with Cummins' transparent book, Daniela Deeg and Cynthia Delaney Lollis's, *Ein Würfelwurf kann den Zufall nicht abschaffen / A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*, 2011, started with a game or exercise based on chance or hazard. The first process followed by Deeg and Lollis in their collaboration was to compile a word-list in 2001. The artists revisited the list ten years later adding new words, 'offering it new perspectives of time and place'. (Lollis) The preparation for this work lasted a decade while the artists created new photographs and illustrations for the project. The title references Stéphane Mallarmé's poem, 'Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard' (1911) as re-imagined by the Belgian artist, Marcel Broodthaers (1969). Broodthaers wrote: 'Mallarmé is at the source of modern art [...]He unwittingly invented modern space.' (Broodthaers: 2020)

Mallarmé's poem proposed to liberate language from traditional conventions of publication by stretching sentences across spreads and using multiple typefaces to abstract both form and content. In designing his edition, whilst retaining the text's alignment, Broodthaers blocked out the lines of the original words with solid black bars of varying width, dependent on the original type size, turning the original poem into an abstract image. It is also notable that one of the editions of Broodthaers' book was translucent, allowing the lower blocked off sections to emerge under and around the upper sections.

Published in an edition of 18, Deeg and Lollis's *Ein Würfelwurf* is the largest of the books considered here (34.5 x 23 x 2.5 cm), and was screenprinted onto transparent paper from Römertum Feinpapiere, printed at Frans Masereel Centrum, Belgium, (a media centre associated with experimentation), and bound with screwpost binding. On encountering the book, one first handles and opens its encapsulating -board box with screenprinted title and colophon.



PLATE 13

This housing increases the reader-handler's anticipation of the internal book which is printed on Cristalla Transparent, a paper capable of great subtleties of colour and transparency, increasing a sense of luxury and an almost fetishistic attention (again recalling Mallarmé) to detail. Each of the contained ten folios (folded twice, quarto-like) revisits travels which the artists took to make these books: Mainz; Washington, D.C.; Venice; Rome; NYC; the Black Forest; Kasterlee, Belgium; Copenhagen; Las Vegas and Baden Baden. A viewer then folds back the loose covers of translucent vinyl to see the words *Übergang* (at lower left) and uncapitalised 'transition' at upper right. The heads of three large directional arrows seem to indicate a signed route opening before us. In fact, these shapes are outlines of the Mainzer Dom (Mainz Cathedral) turned sideways.

The German '*Übergang*' can mean a crossing, a passage, a pedestrian crossing a footbridge a gateway to a crossing, transition, change, a switch from one thing to another, conversion, metabasis or a spatial shift. Deeg and Lollis's work crosses between diverse types of movement on the page and in different types of technology governing change: temporal, geographical and personal. The English word 'transition' stems from Latin and French: 'transire' and Transito: 'to go across' and deals less with the objects associated with facilitating a crossing than the Germanic word and more with the process itself. All words are themselves in transit and exert, (by their positioning, meanings and appearances), an intense spatial power on the page.

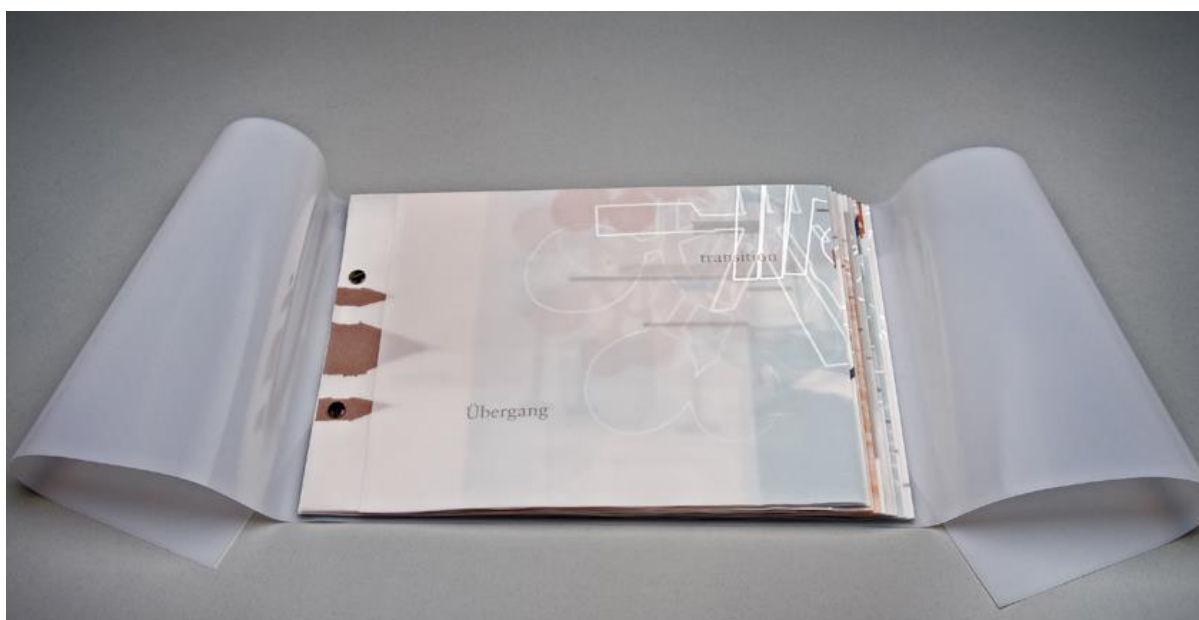


PLATE 14

In starting a book, we are at a juncture, a crossing-point. Just as Broodthaers' 'blocking' of words (emerging in ghostly outline over and under) 'transition' makes clear Mallarmé's use of the paginal architectonics of spacing and lineation in the original poem, so the collaborators' introduction and isolation of these so-called synonyms energises space around and between them. The words are linked together and spaced apart in a spectrum of shared meanings and differences (itself an act of lexical collaboration of sorts), and each has totally distinctive acoustic and graphic weights and identities. The Sabon typeface chosen for this book was originally designed by the German Jan Tschicold and based on the classic French Garamond type, a composite creation which ideally manifests some of Deeg and Lollis's questions about cultural amalgamation and difference.

Acting as dynamic axes held in tension with one another, the paired and yet separately-spaced words expose the semantic gaps and socio-cultural schisms inherent in their juxtaposition and also emphasising the flux of energies which flows between them.

The space between the words and around ‘transition’ is occupied by large images of circular cogs on wheels overlaid with details of other turning devices (from different levels), which, though stilled in context, make us think of the authors’ decision-making and of changes between Mallarmé, Broodthaers and the modern collaborators. The images are flat, suave and beautifully-realised against their subtly tinted background from which they seem to arise. They are screen-printed versions of the artists’ photographs, their broad contours reminding of the recent revival in 1950s and early 60s hand-printed textiles for home décor, although here more obviously applied to the inner workings of machines. The artist’s transparent and translucent book is also a machine of a type and one that takes time to turn through its stages. There are, of course, strong ironies present in the use of domestic stylistics to evoke the technology of industry, travel and public time, all inherent in these pictures rising towards the viewer.

Turning through the book we come across other ‘chance’ and ‘hasard’ word pairings. ‘Sondage’ is the French word for a survey but also a ‘sounding’ in the sense of a sounding of something out (as in using a ship’s plummet to test river-depth) ‘Peiling’ is the Dutch word for ‘a poll’, or a ‘sounding’ in the similar sense to the French word but it also refers to bearings (a rotating support positioned between moving components to facilitate easy movement). ‘Sondage’ floats in pictorial space to the middle left of page whereas ‘peiling’ seems caught in an underlay of darkness with, again, some of Broodthaer’s ‘blocked-in’ lines appearing behind it and that which appears to be an orange image of flamboyant carved wooden clock (of the Black Forest type hinting at the **artists’** travel), with its weights and chains hanging between the words, perhaps implying the temporal and philosophical distance between French and Dutch language and culture. We ‘sound’ the page and its dispositions ‘sounds’ us. The clock’s carved headboard, foliate decorations seem asymmetrical and the lower right side is reproduced above (in the page’s upper right corner) in white outline in a stretched distorted form turned laterally side-on with the long weight particularly visible. Intrinsic ironies accrue. After all, time with its different national zones (America and Germany) must have been much on the artists’ minds in this decade-long collaboration.

Ein Würfelwurf is an exuberant and sensuous exploration of layered space and relativistic time which also probes the ways in which the nuances of language present changes in lived realities. Its diaphanous large pages of Cristalla Transparent are pleasant to turn and handle and, therefore, as a sculptural codex, it exists at a different pole to the slippery, smaller pages of *Pink Noise* yet both books encourage a coming to terms with and a meditation on spaces and on language and its insufficiencies. In both cases the meditation is simultaneously aesthetic and dialectical, and both sequential and complete at any point of viewing.

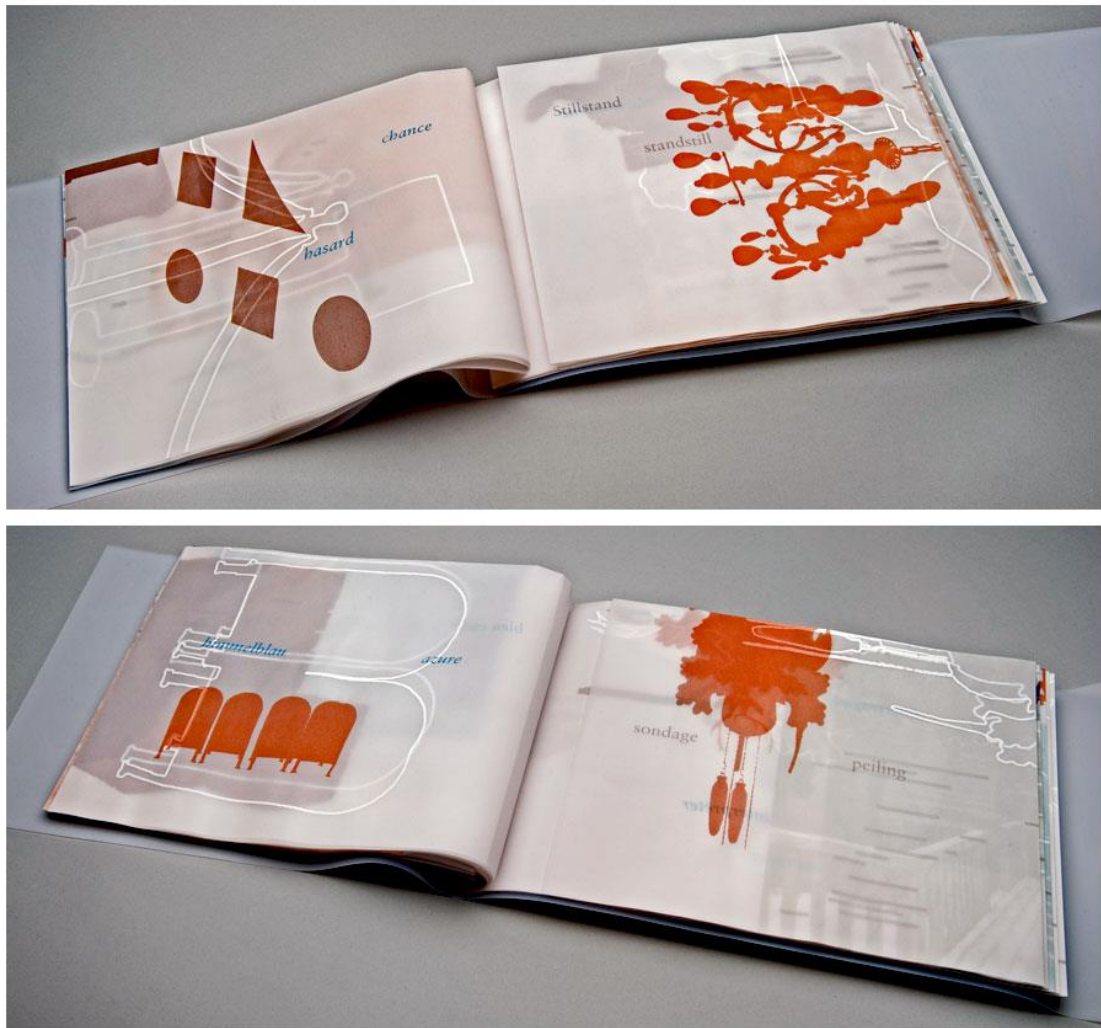


PLATE 15

The materiality of all books is contingent on the observer and involves a series of inter-active and performative processes. Nowhere are these processes more obvious or energised than in close encounters with transparent and translucent books. There is a complex inter-penetration involved in exploring such volumes whether they are printed, screen-printed, scribed, painted or involve other media. Transparency illuminates all we bring to bear on such encounters and, reciprocally, changes our senses of the books and, more generally, that which, in epistemological terms, we call ‘the book’. Paulson and Armstrong’s description of our viewing procedures as multi-dimensional waves seems most germane to these experiences, as does Ingmire’s ongoing sense of mystery. Transparency studies now span the fields of ethnography, political science, psychology, market research and philosophy. After over eighty years of their existence, these multi-dimensional volumes of ‘solid light’, rich in relativity, insights of depth, planar connections, reflections and ‘through-shine’, as Donne phrased it, deserve the full repertoire of our attention.

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Plates 1-3: Hsia Yü, 2008. *Pink Noise*, 2008, published by Garden City Publishing, Taiwan. Photos: © David Annwn
4-6: Tauba Auerbach, *Stab / Ghost*, 2013, published by Three Star Books, Paris. Photos: © Florian Kleinfenn
7-9: Thomas Ingmire, *Jeu de Marseilles/ Game of Marseilles*, 2018, published by Scriptorium St. Francis. Photos © Thomas Ingmire
10-12: Maureen Cummins, *Ghost Diary*, 2003. Photos © Maureen Cummins
13-15: Daniela Deeg and Cynthia Delaney Lollis's, *Ein Würfelwurf*, ETCPress, 2011. Photos © Walker Montgomery

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